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ABSTRACT

Noting that both stress and social support play an important role in middle school students' adjustment and motivation for school, two studies compared the stress and social support experienced by students entering middle school in different settings. The two studies of middle school students included overlapping measures of stress, social support, and school liking of sixth graders who entered middle schools in either urban, urban fringe, or suburban public schools in the northeast. Data were collected at the beginning and at the end of the school year. Analyses of variance showed significant differences in stress and social support, with urban students experiencing significantly higher school stress and significantly lower social support from family, friends, and school personnel than urban fringe or suburban students. Urban students also experienced qualitatively different stressors, which suggests that problems with peers are of much more concern for them than for students entering middle schools in urban fringe or suburban communities. Multiple regression analysis showed that liking school at the end of the year was related to having less school stress and more social support from school personnel at the beginning of the school year, being female, and moving into a middle school in an urban fringe or suburban, rather than an urban community. (Author/KB)

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Differences in Stress and Social Support Among Students Entering Urban, Urban Fringe, or Suburban Middle Schools

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ABSTRACT

Studies of students' experience of stress and social support during the transition to middle school have increased in recent years. Both stress and social support have been shown to play important roles in students' adjustment and motivation for school. However, few studies have compared the stress and social support of students entering middle schools in differing settings (e.g., urban vs. suburban). Examining the differences in students' experience of stress, and the amount of social support available during the transition, may help to illuminate the unique challenges and vulnerabilities taking place within these differing school settings, ultimately leading to better, more informed interventions to help ease this transition.

This poster includes partial data from two different studies of middle school that included overlapping measures of stress, social support, and school liking on 6th-grade students who entered middle schools in either urban (n=134 students), urban fringe (n=263 students), or suburban (n=184 students) public schools in the northeast. Data were collected at the beginning and at the end of the school year.

Analyses of variance showed significant differences in stress and social support, with urban students experiencing significantly higher school stress and significantly lower social support from family, friends, and school personnel than urban fringe or suburban schools. Urban students also experienced qualitatively different stressors which suggests that problems with peers are much more of concern for them than for students entering middle schools in urban fringe or suburban communities. Multiple regression analysis showed that liking school at the end of the year was related to having less school stress and more social support from school personnel at the beginning of the school year, being female, and moving into a middle school in an urban fringe or suburban, rather than an urban community. These results show that students attending middle schools in urban communities are at increased risk for experiencing stress, and highlight the need for interventions targeted toward improving peer relationships and increasing the supportiveness of school personnel.

INTRODUCTION

The move into middle school has been shown to be stressful for many students (Eccles, et al., 1993; Elias, et al., 1992; Wenz-Gross, Siperstein, Untch, & Widaman, 1997). Students experience stress in relation to academics, peer and teacher relationships, and dealing with the new school environment. Much of this stress is thought to be due to developmental changes in the child as they clash with the structural and programmatic demands of the middle school setting (Eccles, et al., 1993). For instance, at a time when the importance of peers is heightened, early adolescents move into a larger school setting where they often must interact with students from many different elementary schools and older students who are more physically and socially advanced. Further, at a time when early adolescents are struggling for greater autonomy, they move into a school setting in which they must develop relationships with multiple teachers who know them less well, and who often place greater emphasis on control and discipline. Finally, at a time when early adolescents struggle with their self-worth and sense of achievement, they must manage greater work loads and increased demands for staying organized–something for which the average early adolescent is generally unprepared.

These normative stressors may be exacerbated in certain middle schools due to contextual factors such as size, location, resources, race relations and programming. In particular, inner city schools are generally larger, may be located in more dangerous neighborhoods, have fewer resources and older equipment, and may have more racial tension, etc. These students may also experience less social support to buffer their stress. Thus, the transition into middle school may not be experienced in the same way by students entering middle schools in urban, urban fringe, or suburban communities.

Understanding the differences in experienced stress and social support during the transition into middle school is especially important because this is a time when motivation and liking of school often decrease , and for some, may lead to academic failure and eventual dropping out of school (Eccles, et al., 1993; Munsch & Wampler, 1993). However, few studies have explored differences in students' experience of this transition in different school settings. This study examines differences in stress and social support among students entering urban, urban fringe, and suburban middle schools, and how their experience of stress and support during the transition relates to their liking of school at the end of the year.

AIMS

1. To examine differences in the amount of stress and types of stressors students report experiencing following the transition into middle schools in urban, urban fringe, or suburban communities.

2. To examine differences in the amount of social support students perceive from family, friends, and school personnel, following the transition into middle schools in urban, urban fringe, or suburban communities.

3. To examine how type of school setting, gender, school stress, and social support from family, friends, and school personnel at the beginning of the school year, relate to school liking at the end of the school year for students making the transition into middle schools in urban, urban fringe, or suburban communities.

PROCEDURES

Participants were 581 6th-grade students who entered middle schools in either urban (n=134 students), urban fringe (n=263 students), or suburban (n=184 students) public schools in the northeast. The median household income of the urban, urban fringe, and suburban communities were $29,180, $38,859, and $53,488, respectively. Percentage of parents in each community who have attained a bachelor's degree or higher are: urban 28%, urban fringe 22%, and suburban, 52%. Students receiving free or reduced lunch programs in each school were: urban 70%, urban fringe 20%, and suburban 7%. Average number of students per teacher in each school were: urban 27, urban fringe 16, and suburban 17. The minority composition of students from the different middle schools were: urban 57% minority, urban fringe 15% minority, and suburban 14% minority. Of the participating students, 299 were boys and 282 were girls.

Students in the urban fringe and suburban schools were part of a larger longitudinal study of the transition into and through middle school. Students in the urban school were part of a pilot study of activities to ease the transition into middle school. The transition activities that the urban students participated in as part of the pilot project were comparable to the activities that the urban fringe and suburban schools already had in place (conducting tours of the school building, holding a parent information night, etc.). Students were surveyed in their classrooms in the fall and again in the spring of their first year of middle school. All surveys were read aloud to students as they followed along and filled in their answers.

Surveys that were administered to students in both projects and reported on here are as follows: In the fall, students received the School Stress Survey (Wenz-Gross, et al., 1997), and the Perceived Social Support Scale (Procidino & Heller, 1983). In the spring, students received the Liking of School Questionnaire and the School Environment Scale (Wenz-Gross, et al., 1997). The Liking of School Questionnaire and the School Environment Scale were converted to *z*-scores by school, and then were summed to create a liking of school composite for use as an outcome measure.

RESULTS

1. Students who entered an urban middle school reported experiencing significantly greater stress than students who entered either urban fringe or suburban middle schools.

2. Students entering urban, as compared to urban fringe or suburban middle schools, differed qualitatively in the stressors they rated, on average, as most upsetting. Students in the urban middle school reported many more items dealing with peer problems: "being called names", "having problems with my boyfriend or girlfriend", "missing my friends from elementary school", "being pushed or hit by kids at school", and "not having anyone to eat lunch with". Further, about twice as many students in the urban versus the urban fringe or suburban schools reported experiencing the stress of "having something stolen" and "being pressured to smoke, drink alcohol, or use drugs".

3. Students who entered an urban middle school reported experiencing significantly less social support from family, peers, and school personnel.

4. Multiple regression analyses showed that greater liking of school at the end of the 6th grade was predicted by being in urban fringe or suburban school settings, being female, and by having less school stress and more social support from school personnel at the beginning of the school year.

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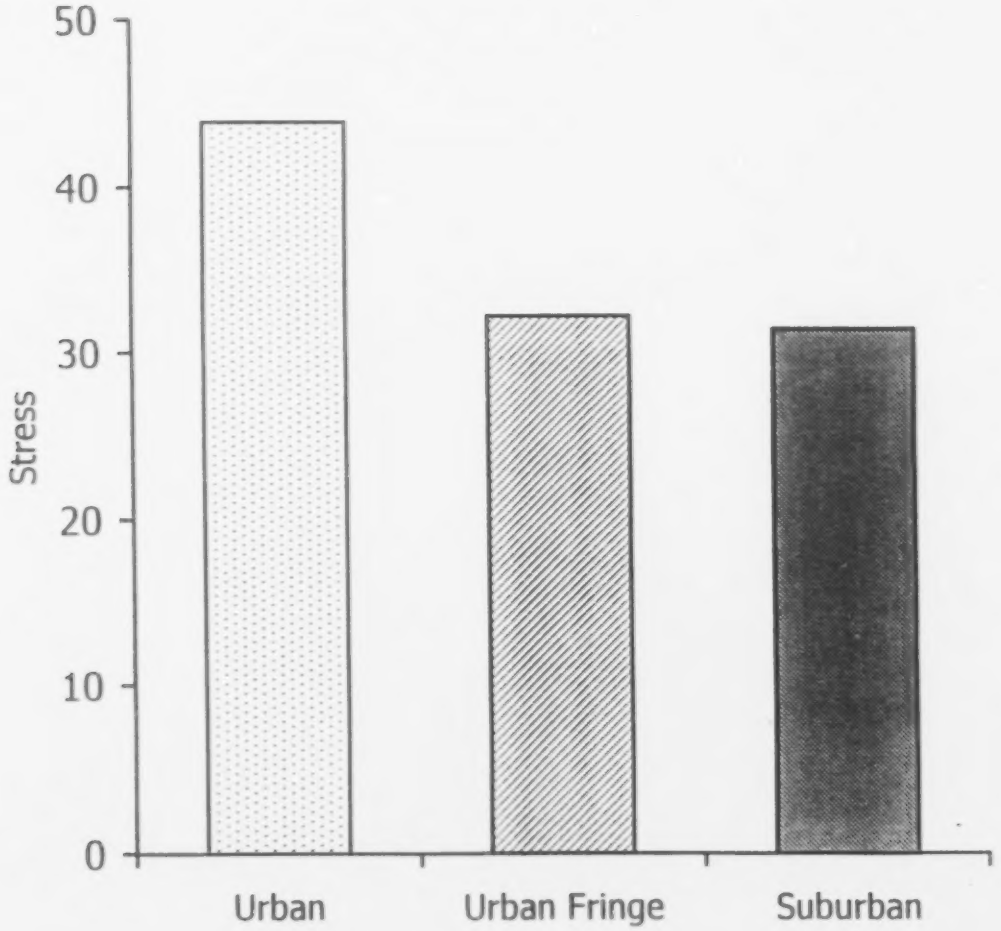
CONCLUSIONS

1. Students moving into middle schools in urban communities are at greater risk for experiencing stress following this transition, stress that differs qualitatively from students moving into middle schools in urban fringe or suburban communities. Interventions to decrease this stress should focus not only on academics, but also on peer relationships.

2. Students moving into middle schools in urban communities not only experience more stress, but also less social support from family, peers, and school personnel. Interventions are needed in urban schools to improve student-teacher relationships and increase parental involvement and support during the transition into middle school.

3. By decreasing school stress and increasing the supportiveness of school personnel, particularly in urban school settings, we may improve students' motivation for and connection to school at a critical juncture when students become at risk for dropping out.

Amount of Stress 6th Grade Students Reported Experiencing Following the Transition into Middle School



Top School Stressors of 6th Grade Students Following the Transition into Middle School

Stressors included are those that on a scale of 1 to 4, where 1=not upsetting and 4=very upsetting, the average stress rating was $\leq$ 2.5.

Urban

Stressor	Mean Stress Rating	% Students who said it Happened
Having something stolen	3.4	64%
Getting poor grades on my report card	3.0	37%
Being embarrassed by a teacher	3.0	49%
Being pressured to smoke, drink alcohol, or use drugs	2.9	18%
Failing a test	2.9	69%
Having to do too many assignments at one time	2.8	90%
Being called names	2.6	75%
Having problems with my boyfriend or girlfriend	2.6	28%
Having to wear things I don't like	2.6	39%
Missing my friends from elementary school	2.6	70%
Being pushed or hit by kids at school	2.5	34%
Being treated unfairly by a teacher	2.5	42%
Losing my schoolwork	2.5	64%
Not having anyone to eat lunch with	2.5	11%

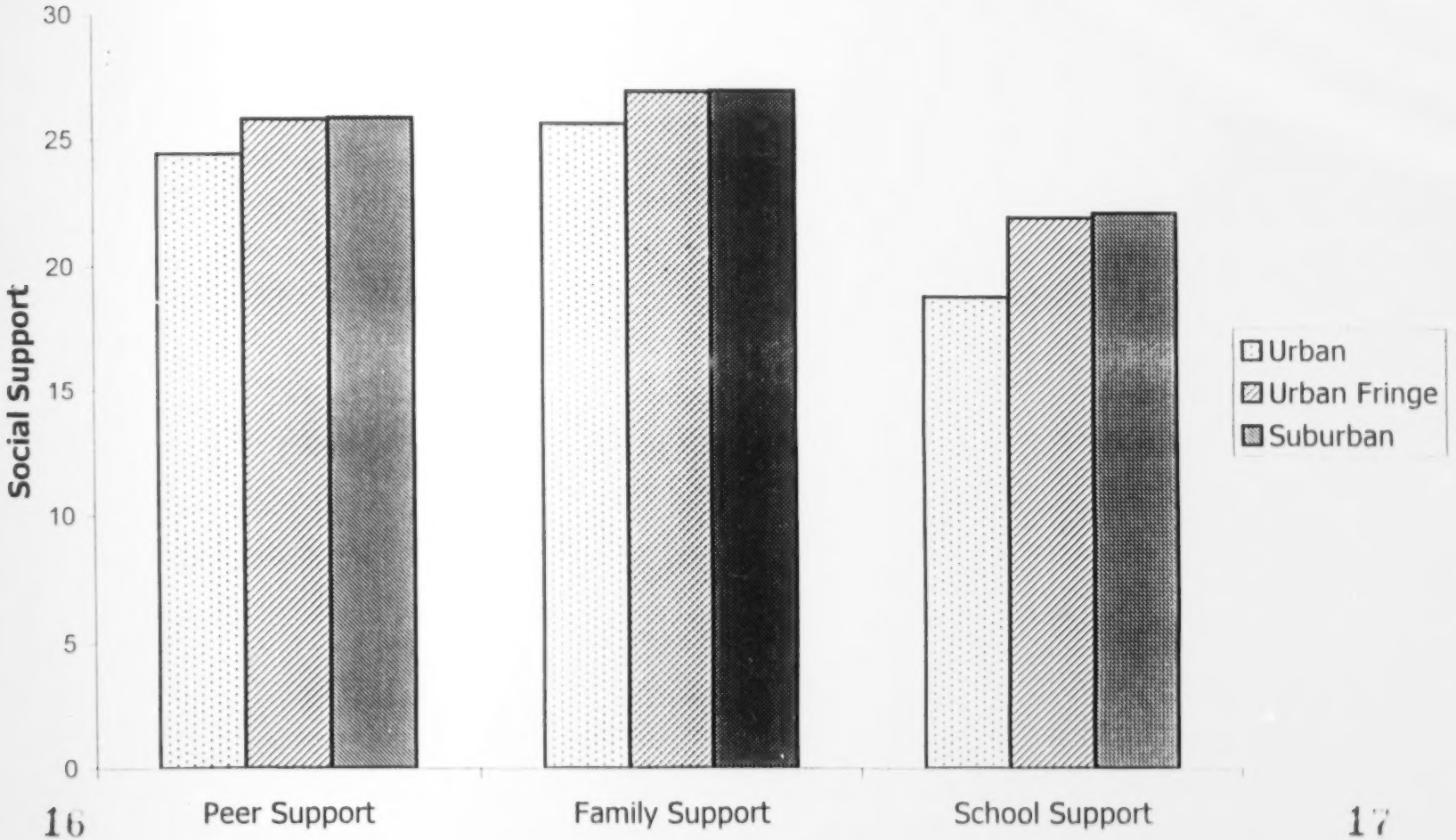
Urban Fringe

Stressor	Mean Stress Rating	% Students who said it Happened
Failing a test	3.1	52%
Getting poor grades on my report card	3.0	33%
Having something stolen	3.0	40%
Losing my schoolwork	2.9	18%
Being afraid of weapons or violence in school	2.6	24%
Being treated unfairly by a teacher	2.6	28%
Having to wear things I don't like	2.6	31%
Being pressured to smoke, drink alcohol, or use drugs	2.6	8%
Having to do too many assignments at one time	2.5	79%
Being embarrassed by a teacher	2.5	40%

Suburban

Stressor	Mean Stress Rating	% Students who said it Happened
Having something stolen	3.3	31%
Getting poor grades on my report card	2.8	20%
Being pressured to smoke, drink alcohol, or use drugs	2.8	5%
Being treated unfairly by a teacher	2.8	35%
Failing a test	2.7	27%
Being left out of a group of kids I want to be with	2.6	34%
Being afraid of weapons or violence in school	2.5	24%
Having to do too many assignments at one time	2.5	87%
Being embarrassed by a teacher	2.5	44%
Losing my schoolwork	2.5	50%

Amount of Social Support 6th Grade Students Reported Receiving from Peers, Family and Adults at School Following the Transition into Middle School



Predictors of School Liking